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Listening Back: A Podcast About Encouraging Social Change Through Theatre of the Past

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LISTENING BACK: A PODCAST ABOUT ENCOURAGING SOCIAL CHANGE
THROUGH THEATRE OF THE PAST

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Completed in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts
with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By

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December 2020

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ABSTRACT

This CE/T explores the nature of theatre as a tool to encourage social change. Theatre is an important art form that can influence audiences into considering contemporary societal concerns and taking action. This capstone specifically addresses theatre prior to the 2000s as effective commentary on modern issues in America, such as police brutality, discrimination, reproductive rights, and religious hypocrisy. I have created a podcast as a resource for young dramaturgs and activists about existing and accessible plays that can be used to address important societal issues. This project is a culmination of my interest in theatre, history, communication and social justice. This podcast is intended to encourage the production and research of older plays that show the severity and longevity of certain issues still impacting today's society. I have conducted dramaturgical research on plays of the past and their context both at the time of the playwright's writing and my analysis.

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VITA

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PURPOSE AND PROCESS

Theatre is a powerful, unified art form that allows both artist and audience to comment on the state of the world. Theatre itself is not always world-changing, but the message the audience leaves with can encourage them to take action. The idea that theatre can influence and encourage social change is not new. Theatre scholar and Dean of the College at Princeton Jill Dolan has written several books about the ways theatre engages with broader culture. She has written multiple essays and articles about feminist and queer theatre, including the award-winning *Feminist Spectator as Critic*, and books such as *Utopia in Performance* which details theatre's importance as an art form and to social commentary. As referenced in the first episode script, Dolan says, "Theatre and performance help shape and promote certain understandings of who "we" are, of what an American looks like and believes in" (5). Theatre provides the audience with a new outlook on their own lives and what their lives could be.

Dramaturgy

Dramaturgy is a research field and process of theatre scholars. As defined by the Dramaturgy and Literary Managers of the Americas, "dramaturgs contextualize the world of a play; establish connections among the text, actors, and audience; [...] and create conversations about plays in their communities" ("The Role of the Dramaturg").

Dramaturgs have many roles, but for this capstone, I focused on selecting and arranging plays that speak to modern social issues that I care about, researching the context of the show and issues to uncover further connections, and communicating my findings in an

accessible format to encourage more dramaturgs to consider these plays and issues for their own theatres. My experience as a festival dramaturg has allowed me to carefully consider the impact of shows in the moment they are being produced, as well as the message that is shared through play selection and arrangement. In past dramaturgical roles, I have worked to cater language and content to the audience and production via program notes, lobby displays, and educational packets. This capstone allowed me to use that experience with research and communication in a more creative format, so I chose a podcast to reach the specific audience of young dramaturgs and theatre activists.

Dramaturgy is about creating accessible communication tools for cast, crew and audience members. Often, dramaturgs gather research about playwrights, play context, production context, and more to answer the key questions for every production: Why this show, why here, and why now? Every production is stronger when the purpose and context in a broader world is justified. Dramaturgs adapt their communication styles and materials to a production's target audience. The language of delivery must also be considered, as the impact of the information can be lost in inaccessible jargon.

The Podcast

Podcasting allows the communicator to determine the tone the audience literally hears, rather than what they might infer from reading. With the sensitive issues being discussed, I felt a podcast would be the most effective way to communicate my thoughts while sharing my genuine feelings. Writing for the podcast format required adjusting my language from the academic style to writing for ear. Sentences are more naturalistic, occasionally fragments, and allow filler language to serve as mental transitions and moments of breath. The intention is for informality to make the podcast an entertaining

and informative show for the kind of popular audience with which dramaturgs often communicate. I also added a website where listeners can access the podcast, additional reading, and the sources I used on each episode. This streamlines the audio while also providing listeners with the option to review episode citations.

I then had to decide on what kind of podcast to make. I originally felt that two or three longer episodes could be useful in sharing multiple plays per issue. After realizing that an audience, no matter how interested, would likely not have the time to listen to thirty minutes or more of a continuous analysis of plays and issues, I switched my attention to choosing a shorter format. From there, I decided to create ten- to fifteen-minute episodes that are play-centric rather than issue-centric, using the issues to connect the plays across the entire season. I chose four plays, with brief mentions of two others to give a variety of content in the first season. I have established multiple themes, periods, and styles that I am interested in and would be willing to explore in further seasons, leaving plenty of room for growth.

The first season of the podcast addresses four separate plays across 90 years of theatre and multiple countries. Later seasons could be more thematic or location or decade specific, but it was important that the first season be broad, addressing multiple pertinent issues impacting American lives daily and including plays of many time periods to express the long history of social commentaries that apply to modern issues. I was influenced in play selection by prior experience with these plays in my theatre history and feminist theatre courses or by experience with their modern adaptations.

The specific shows were chosen to fit the following criteria: a publication date prior to the year 2000, the impact of the show's early productions, and the play's

relevance to modern issues. Each play was selected based on social issues that impact the wellbeing of Americans both today and in the past 130 years. These issues are police brutality, systemic racism, intersectional feminism, sexual education, abortion, and religious hypocrisy. The corresponding shows that commented on these issues were *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* by Anna Deavere Smith, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange, *Spring Awakening* by Frank Wedekind, and *God of Vengeance* by Sholem Asch.

The Plays

Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992 is about the direct impacts of police brutality, the Rodney King case, and the Los Angeles uprising on the Los Angeles community.

Twilight is a documentary theatre piece that provides the audience with the voices and perspectives of the Los Angeles community members in a moving commentary about the interconnectedness of our humanity. The playwright, Anna Deavere Smith created this piece by conducting over a hundred interviews with individuals involved or impacted by the protests, cutting and arranging the interviews to form a narrative, and then rehearsing the show using the audio clips rather than a written script to create verbatim theatre (Proffitt). *Twilight* introduces the audience to people rather than characters due to Smith's loyalty to her interviewees.

Today, this piece can speak to the Black Lives Matter movement against systemic racism and police brutality. Black Lives Matter so urgent in the wake of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's killings, daily protests, and social media outrage from advocates. *Twilight* advocates for the voices of protestors and victims of racist violence. It encourages people to listen to multiple perspectives and recognize our own humanity and

connectedness (Smith). This play resonates with the outrage about police brutality that has been dominating the news cycle in recent years.

For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf is a choreopoem from the 1970s that addresses the double discrimination faced by Black women in America. The poems were written by Ntozake Shange, who collaborated with a director, dancers, and actresses to develop those poems into a shared performance piece. The original actresses that helped develop the play's final state were also the original Broadway cast for the play's 1976 debut. The choreopoem was written specifically for Black women and acknowledges that they are not alone in their experiences. The individual poems address experiences such as friendship among women, heartbreak, domestic violence, abortion, and self-discovery.

The first Off-Broadway revival of *For Colored Girls* since the show's premiere in 1976 was staged by the Public Theatre in October of 2020 and was so popular with audiences that the performance dates were extended four times (Clement). The death of Breonna Taylor, the lack of media coverage on violence against Black women and the disproportionate number of Black women being affected by the current pandemic makes the show feel even more urgent. *For Colored Girls* is a great example of intersectional feminism, a concept that has been embraced more in the last few years by feminist advocates. The Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements should encompass Black women, but the #SayHerName movement was deliberately created as direct and intersectional activism that works specifically for Black women. Professor and lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw coined "intersectional feminism" as a legal term that recognizes the importance of including race, ethnicity, social status, and other factors of identity when

discussing feminism (Coaston). The advocacy for Black women in both *For Colored Girls* and modern America is so connected that I felt the play was essential to include.

The third play, *Spring Awakening*, addresses the dangers of lacking sexual education and repressing the voices of teenagers. It was written in Germany in 1890 or 1891, and at the time of production, the show critiqued the lack to legal abortion access and the sexual misinformation plaguing teenagers. The play follows a group of teenagers with little to no proper knowledge of puberty and sex, which was common for the time (Fishman). One girl, fourteen, is raped and dies from a botched abortion. A boy, also fourteen, commits suicide after being overwhelmed by school and ignored by his parents. Another boy, thirteen, is blamed for the girl's death despite the abortion being the true cause and for his friend's suicide because he tried to share his knowledge on sex. The adults of the show are blamed for these outcomes as they ignore, abuse, and misinform these teenagers, explaining the play's alternate title, *The Children's Tragedy* (Wedekind).

Spring Awakening is specifically relevant to this moment because of the death of pro-choice Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the following appointment of conservative anti-choice advocate Amy Coney Barrett to her seat in the Supreme Court. Conservative legislation has pushed to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and still allows a majority of states to teach abstinence-only sex education ("American Adolescents' Sources of Sexual Health Information"). *Spring Awakening*, while written in the 19th century, speaks to these modern issues of abortion access and sex education that directly impact American teens. This play is particularly resonant to those in the south whose access to comprehensive sex education and abortion are further limited. While the play's 2006 alternative rock musical adaptation is already popular, producing the straight play

would highlight the severity and longevity of the issues due to being written over a century ago.

The final episode of the podcast is about *God of Vengeance*, a play from 1906. The play was a groundbreakingly popular piece of Yiddish theatre (Nahshon). The show follows a Jewish father who idolizes his virtuous teen daughter while also running a brothel. His daughter falls in love with one of the prostitutes, and the relationship between these two girls is the highlight of positive values in the show. The father and mother are shown to be religious hypocrites that disrespect the Torah, while their daughter is still this model Jewish character. The topic of the play and the treatment of the original cast both hit the issue of hypocrisy that is relevant to today's American politics and religious rhetoric. Representation of Jewish characters in a negative light and lesbianism portrayed in a positive light, both by a Jewish playwright from Poland, were controversial enough at the time to have the cast arrested and deported to Europe during a period of rising anti-Semitism (Vogel).

The issue of religious hypocrisy, as well as LGBTQ rights, is increasingly relevant now thanks to conservative politics' appeal to distorted versions of Christian philosophy and use the Bible to justify discrimination against different communities. Christianity has become ever-present in modern policy, despite the continued advocacy for the separation of church and state. This issue also envelopes the pro-life movement that uses select Christian views to promote anti-abortion legislation. *God of Vengeance* is a historical comment on why religious hypocrisy is so common and so harmful.

Organization

I chose to put *Twilight* first in the episode lineup because of the urgency surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement this year. *For Colored Girls* follows *Twilight* and the Black Lives Matter episode because it also speaks to many of the same issues and introduces double discrimination and intersectionality. *Spring Awakening* comes third as a transition from intersectional feminism to reproductive rights. I chose to use *God of Vengeance* last to segue from reproductive rights and the pro-life movement to conservative politics using Christianity to defend policies. This play allows the podcast's first season to end on a more hopeful note due to the tone and discussion of the semi-adaptation, *Indecent* by Paula Vogel.

Reflection & Conclusion

This capstone has allowed me to dive deeper into the ways theatre comments on our society. I have used my education and love for theatre and communication to create a useful podcast exploring issues that matter to me. Dramaturgically, I have learned about different and interesting contexts in which plays I already enjoyed had been written. This podcast, to me, is an excellent development from my feminist theatre course and podcast where I discovered my passion for theatre commentary and its relationship to social issues. I am proud of the choice to produce a podcast because the short-form, audio format, along with the website, becomes a useful tool for young dramaturgs.

I hope to expand this project into more seasons of the podcast. Now that I have shown the variety of topics and issues I am interested in, I would love to explore the play and issue suggestions or requests of listeners. For future seasons, I would be seeking diverse plays that can be used to support migrants, indigenous people, and other marginalized groups facing discrimination. I would also be including plays that resonate

with issues I have discussed in this first season, and additional issues like income inequality and Islamophobia.

This project has further proven to me the importance of theatre in our world. Theatre is a useful tool in encouraging social change. Theatre can introduce people to issues and stories that influence their opinion and catalyze their action. I believe that theatre is crucial to the arts and to the modern audience because of the powerful voices and messages it can share with everyone. This project has also increased my passion for dramaturgy. Theatre research is so expansive and interesting that I could keep making connections to any issue that I find reason to fight for. Both my podcast and theatre of the past have the potential to influence people to pursue important social change through the arts.

SCRIPT: EPISODE 1

“Welcome to the Show and Meet the Host”

Welcome to Listening Back, the podcast where I find old plays and connect them to today’s issues! I’m your host, Maddie Rose. I am a dramaturg, a writer, and a podcast-maker. To begin, I should probably explain what I’m doing here and why I think you should be here too.

This show is a culmination of my passion for theatre, history, social justice, and open dialogue. The goal of this podcast is to give you some ideas of plays that are super relevant to today’s issues but were written for a different time. I like old plays. I love the new stuff too, but I’m fascinated by the connections that can be made to plays from a hundred years ago. Playwrights from the past had no idea what the future would look like, and it’s so interesting to see the interaction between their words on modern issues. It makes today’s issues seem even more outrageous when we see that artists and advocates have been speaking out against the same injustices for actual decades.

This podcast is a collection of dramaturgical research I’ve done on theatre and the social issues it can address. Dramaturgy is a really just fancy word for theatre research. The job can consist of play selection, talkback hosting, general research (or really specific research), and plenty more. Oftentimes, a dramaturg’s purpose is to provide context and ensure everyone is understanding what is going on. This means talking with your playwright of a new work to make sure their message is coming across to the

audience. Or making sure the director has some idea of a play's production history and historical context or making sure they hold true to their production's main ideas. It may mean creating program notes, educational resources, and displays for the audience to better understand parts of the play or production. The title has a hundred different meanings, but at the end of the day, it comes with a passion for theatre and communication.

For this podcast, my dramaturgy was focused on play selection and research on both past and present social issues. I believe that theatre is a really great tool for social commentary. And that's something a ton of theatre scholars believe that too. Historically, theatre has been an effective way to voice thoughts on social issues affecting artists and the general public. Theatre has given voices to people who often get overshadowed, and shares issues with people who may be unaware that the issues exist. David Román describes theatre and performance as a way to shape and inform the "contemporary", or the modern state of things. And he's right. Theatre as an art form can kind of direct our beliefs and inform us of social issues. And Jill Dolan, another theatre scholar, describes theatre as this way to experience a different future for ourselves. She says, "Theatre and performance help shape and promote certain understandings of who 'we' are, of what an American looks like and believes in" (Dolan 5). And this podcast examines the shows that still show what America looks like, and some changes I think we can agree need to be made.

For this show, I am going to be looking at social issues that theatre from years ago can still comment on. Plays that can inform us of how long these issues have been around, and how they've evolved over time. We are going to look at police brutality,

racism, and protests from the 90s that are essentially the groundwork for the Black Lives Matter movement. We'll examine the double discrimination Black women faced in the 70s and still face today. In episode 4, we take it way back to the 1890s to look at the effects of abortion regulations and the importance of comprehensive sex ed. And we'll wrap up the season with a show about religious hypocrisy and how that times in with modern politics.

In season one, our most recent play is from 20 years ago, and the oldest one is from 130 years ago. The issues they confront are still big issues today. How can we speak out for so long and see little to no change? Or a reversal of changes to be more "traditional"? Many of these issues are systemic, meaning they can't really be fixed with band-aid policies and new figureheads. There has to be a motivation to dismantle the system completely, which feels like an overwhelming task. Theatre is one tool we can use to motivate people to see and then fight back against injustices. It's a really unified art form that has always been a little controversial due to its ability to encourage real change. People come to a show, and they see normal people on stage fighting the battles they want to fight. It's an art form that is all about action, and we can use theatre to take political action too.

I believe that we are exposed to more social issues today thanks to the internet. Social media has empowered us to be connected and generally more aware of issues. It's the main reason I know about a lot of progressive issues that are usually hidden by conservative media in my area. Change comes with acknowledgement and recognition. In years past, you only found out about major social issues if they were adjacent to your community. Not, anyone can learn about anything. There are a lot of issues. It can be

overwhelming, but at least we have the opportunity to learn more now than ever. And we can organize. We can speak out. We can connect with other people to make change in waves.

I'm making this show as an attempt to reach people. Theatre doesn't cause revolutions, but it reaches out to people, it's suggestive. It's this popular form of social commentary that can motivate people, and I want to motivate theatre people to take advantage of that. With the increased visibility we have on more issues, theatre becomes an even more useful tool in empowering people to make change. I want people to see that today's issues aren't new. And old plays are proof of that. They are early pushes for change that rocked the boat then, and they can keep doing that today.

So, about your host. I am a white college senior in Kentucky. I'm from a rural town with most of my exposure to social issues coming from the internet until I got to college. I consider myself a progressive, intersectional feminist, and someone who still has a lot to learn about being a productive advocate. I believe Black Lives Matter, and Black Women Matter. Growing up in the South, I have seen that hypocritical religious language drives too much of our government decisions when we are supposed to have religious freedom and a separation of church and state. This firsthand experience strengthens my defense of comprehensive sex education, a woman's right to choose, and LGBTQ equality. With the issues we are going to discuss, it's important to understand where I stand, and that I am by no means an expert on any of these subjects. I have conducted months of research on these issues and shows, but there is a ton of information I haven't uncovered or been exposed to yet. I just want to share what I believe, and what I've learned with you guys, and put that in the context of theatre.

This podcast is meant to be a tool for you. It's meant to inspire you to look back on past issues, because history is so repetitive. And like I mentioned earlier, I think it's so impactful to see that decades ago, people were writing plays about the same issues we face today. Sure, we have made some progress in terms of equality, but it's really important to recognize that we haven't moved very far in other areas of social issues. These issues that people are so vocal about now are the exact same ones that people were vocal about back then. Progress is about persistence. And I think these plays can help us raise awareness of the progress we still need to make. They show how long the fights have lasted, and that gives us the power to keep fighting until lasting change has been made.

Resources for every episode will be up on our website: listeningbackpodcast.wordpress.com. There, I'll have my sources, as well as some more info that didn't make it into the episodes. There's also a contact form so if you guys have any questions, play recommendations for the show, or just want to say hi, stop on by! See you guys next week for *Twilight, Los Angeles, 1992*.

EPISODE 2

Black Lives Matter and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*

Welcome back. I'm your host, Maddie Rose. Want to do a play that resonates with the Black Lives Matter movement? Well, for the first play of our series, we are dialing in on *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* by Anna Deavere Smith. I'll give you a breakdown of the show, the playwright, and why it is still important today. Let's get into a little background first.

So back in 1992, there were a series of riots that became known as the Los Angeles uprising. These riots were sparked by the announcement that four police officers on the LAPD were being acquitted for charges of excessive force. A year earlier, these officers were caught on a twelve-minute video beating a Black man named Rodney King. They pulled him over for speeding and pulled him out of his car. He was tased, struck with batons over fifty times, and had several broken bones. All by four men that are supposed to protect the people of LA. The officers didn't know that George Holliday was taping it all from his apartment. Only 81 seconds of that video was used in court, and those 81 seconds didn't prove these officers guilty. So, they got off. And people were infuriated.

For six days, LA citizens rioted. Buildings were set ablaze, stores were looted, and 63 people died. These riots didn't come from nowhere. There were several incidences of police brutality and racist violence in the community. The tensions that caused the LA riots had been simmering for years. This trial was just the breaking point.

During the riots, tensions between different minority groups also transitioned to violence, particularly between the neighboring Black and Korean communities.

So. *Twilight*. *Twilight* is a play about the identity of the people in Los Angeles, 1992. The show is a series of interviews, conducted by the playwright, from people who were directly involved in the riots, witnesses, and community members. Anna Deavere Smith conducted over a hundred interviews and worked with dramaturgs of different races to get the most encompassing and powerful version of the story she wanted to tell (Rowe). To understand *Twilight*, we have to understand the process and structure. And to understand those, we have to first know our playwright. Anna Deavere Smith has always been a writer but got particularly involved with social justice in college (“Anna Deavere Smith”). Much of her theatre is based on true events, where she collects all sides of a story. She conducts interviews for context and language, and then uses those voices to tell her view of the stories.

Smith recorded over 175 interviews with Los Angeles residents affected by the riots (Proffitt). These interviews are verbatim. Smith then cut and arranged the interviews to create a clarified, moving commentary by and about the people of LA. Smith recorded each interview, where we meet Rodney King’s aunt, a jury member, the LAPD police chief, victim Reginald Denny, and so many more. The piece presents the opinions and identities of each of these real-life people through their own words and actions. And did I already say it was a solo performance piece? In the original performance, Smith plays all forty of the characters. She becomes each person, with their accents and attitudes and body language. And she won the Tony for Best Play because she was so damn good at it.

So, you meet all these people through their voice, and you get their honest reactions that Smith got in just a few months after the riots. You get reactions and history of an insanely diverse group of people. It feels like you're watching the news, or skipping through channels and these people pop up, and each of them says what they want, unfiltered, and unapologetic. There's this surreal genuineness of the piece. If it's done right, it's a legacy to the community that dealt with all of these emotions. You have this honest connection to so many different types of people and it's so honest because they aren't really characters. Smith ensures that each real person is represented as accurately as possible. In rehearsal, she wouldn't read a script. She had her cuts of the interviews on tape, and would repeat each line with the same tone, same language, and same breath that the individual used. She made notes of unique physicalities or pronunciations to make sure she got every person right (Smith). She also maintains accuracy by recording the name, job title, and age, which are meant to be displayed before each interview scene. It's their words, their feelings, down to an eye twitch or mispronounced word, it's another, real, person right in front of you.

The show, according to Smith, is a story of community (Johnson). As a solo piece, forty different people from all different backgrounds get to be heard. From the same actress. Their words treated with respect. And not all of their words are good. They aren't poetic. They're just human. And they couldn't belong to anyone else. That character was them. Smith made sure of it. So as a solo piece, this show is about the unity among these people. Half of them don't even like each other. But they're still connected. At first, they might be connected only by voice. Smith's voice. But then you start to realize that no, there's more here. These people experienced something that was

traumatic in so many different ways. And they aren't even on the same side of the situation as Smith, morally. They're just real people. They're all connected by their depth and humanity.

I think we are so prone to forgetting that everyone is a person. Everybody. Even people who we don't agree with. Everybody is a person with real thoughts, real opinions, and real voices. And this show really throws that in your face. You have people you so badly want to hate. Like the Beverly Hills rich people who are just mad they have to stay home. They don't get what's happening in the streets, and that in itself is important (Smith). You have to know what everyone is doing, how they feel. And then there's this jury member. I think of how in these high-profile cases, it's not the judge that's acquitting these officers or whoever. It's people. It's another person. It's a person who is probably just mad they had to call out of work or school for a week to do their "civic duty". And then they get something like this. They have to listen to the evidence, that is so tailored to either side of the story. And you are asking ordinary people, you and me people, to judge by a grainy video, that they don't even see all of, to see that and then see the man in the wheelchair who is, I guess that guy you see in the video, and you know people are waiting for you to make that decision. 81 seconds of video. And the world knows your face. You decide you don't have enough information. And now, you have the face of a Bad Person. Why didn't you find them guilty? Why didn't you try harder to convince the other eleven people that these cops did a bad thing? *Twilight* shows you that person. You meet this jury member, who won't even share their name a year later because they are so scared, so hated by so many people. Yeah there was a lot of crazy shit happening, it's obviously not that one person's fault. But even still you want to blame it

on them. And they're a real person. Who just, didn't speak up. Who's still scared to speak up. Imagine the guilt. It's a lesson in empathy. You have to hear people, and really listen, to begin to understand.

So. Today. It's the fall of 2020. Breonna Taylor's case is still ongoing. Police used a no-knock warrant to enter her home unannounced. They were investigating a drug case, and only had her address because they thought her ex-boyfriend, who was already in custody, could have used her address to receive packages. There were no drugs in her home. Louisville police shot an EMT with no evidence connecting her with a crime. And they haven't been charged. One officer recently pled guilty to wanton endangerment, not for Taylor, but for the bullets that could've entered other apartments. One officer was dismissed. The other three are still getting paid.

We also have protesters being beat and teargassed by cops. These global protests, continuing on in many cities, began with the death of George Floyd. Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Floyd was already handcuffed when Chauvin pinned him to the ground by his neck, where he kneeled for almost 9 minutes. Floyd had been accused of using a counterfeit \$20. Three other officers prevented any bystander intervention. Many cities have been protesting since Floyd's death. Portland has been protesting almost every night since May 2020. The coverage in Portland specifically has shown acts of violence that police have been committing not only against protesters, but also against journalists and bystanders.

And then you have, this horrible, awfully long list, of Black people who have been treated horribly, or outright killed, by the system. Trayvon Martin. Michael Brown. Eric Garner. Tamir Rice. Jacob Blake. There are too many names to recognize because

the extent and severity of racism and police brutality go too far. And people are infuriated. The Black Lives Matter movement was founded in 2013 (“About”). It’s a social movement, aimed to dismantle systemic racism, eliminate police brutality, and protect Black people from injustice and violence. It’s seven years later, and it’s a battle cry for empathy. For protection, for equal rights that we somehow just can’t get straight. The system, of 1992 and 2020, feel so broken. It’s not just six days in Los Angeles. Protests are ongoing and worldwide.

Twilight is important here. It is relevant. *Twilight* was written 28 years ago. And it feels like a picture of yesterday. Last week. The last six months. So theatre people. Social justice people. Generally, decent, people. We can listen. We can share. We can encourage empathy. You cannot solve a problem, or even address it properly if you do not listen to the people involved. If you don’t get it, at least not ninety percent, you can’t fix it. There are a lot of issues right now. And taking them one at a time, can we try to look at the common thread we have? Can we listen? Again, I’m not saying that we have to like everyone. *Twilight* doesn’t say that either. What the show is saying, is that we are all real people. That our identity is absolutely essential to our beliefs. To everything we do and say, our identity is our actions and our actions are our identity. And our community is still part of our identity. And we all have that in common. We forget. This show connects people and forces us to face our connections with people.

And it doesn’t have to be a solo piece. Yeah, that was the original point, but let’s face it, how many people are Anna Deavere Smith? I mean come on, she’s incredible. So say you want to put it on. The script calls for eight actors, five characters each (Smith). If you do that, you get to see more intense connections between certain characters, certain

ways their language calls back to each other. And they've never even met. You can change the suggested casting and connect other characters. If you double cast, or triple, quadruple, whatever. You can find connections between so many people. And these connections can speak to your community. It's great, there's so many roles, and it's so open-ended what connections you could make. It is important to be conscious of those connections though. It can't be random. You don't want to alienate any of the characters by casting similar ones on the same person. This play values our differences, and your casting should, too. Use the diversity to make connections, instead of making connections that then create a division among characters.

Say you want your production to be more individualized. You could have 20 or maybe even 40 actors. Talk about casting opportunities. Say you cast, a ton of people. Then you get to see the depth of each person. Each character is on a single body, so you have a sense of individuality you don't see in the solo show. You get to see, more clearly, where Smith put them in the show. Why one interview falls after another. And why one person might feel out of place, you can actually see why they feel out of place. You can draw more attention to their differences, while the language and organization still creates this sense of unity and connectedness.

Twilight is the story of a community. A racially divided, hurting community. And it's incredible. It's a message about how we exist in our community, how we can be so ignorant and selective when listening to people. And today. The Black community is hurting. As a white woman I recognize, it is a struggle and identity that I could never fully understand, but I can listen. And empathize. And make connections on where the overlaps are. Real people. We are real people, and we have thoughts and feelings and

opinions. We all live together, and we have got to understand that. There is no change without understanding. We can take to the streets, we can put on powerful shows, but others have to be able to understand, honestly. We have to find ourselves in each other to really empathize and listen in a way that is productive. In a way that's helpful. This show shares the voices that we need to hear to understand and then make change. Theatre is a powerful motivator and catalyst for people who are unaware of issues or ways to help. *Twilight* makes you listen, on page and stage, which is why we still need it.

Twilight is relevant. It speaks to now. It is even louder when you consider that it's 28 years old. And could be written about today. Tomorrow. Last month, next year. Resources to the show, information used in this episode, interviews, and the text can be found at our website.

EPISODE 3

#SayHerName and *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*

Welcome back to Listening Back. I'm your host, Maddie Rose. Do you want to do a play that resonates with #SayHerName? Well, this week, we dive into the choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange.

For Colored Girls is a choreopoem, a series of poems set to music and dance. Ntozake Shange wrote several poems in the early 1970s as spoken word pieces. They were often autobiographical accounts of the double discrimination of racism and sexism that Black women experience. Shange describes the show as “the personal story of a woman bec[oming] every woman” (Shange 2010). *For Colored Girls* is about shared life experiences. The play speaks specifically to Black women, offering the comfort of seeing that they aren't alone in their experiences - enjoyable or awful. There can be a sense of validation in sharing what Shange describes as “secret, unshared” thoughts and feelings with other women (2010). Shange's sister encouraged her to expand the piece to not only be a solo book of poems, but a play for multiple actresses to share. She worked with the dancer Paula Moss, developing movement and choreography to help tell the stories. Then her sister convinced her to meet with a director, Oz Scott, who inspired her idea to create a rainbow through actresses, now known as the ladies of their specific rainbow color. She then worked with Scott to workshop the poems as a full performance piece, with herself

and Moss joined as performers by an original ensemble of women: Aku Kadogo, Laurie Carlos, Trazana Beverley, with Janet League and Rise Collins, improvising and playing with them to continue growing the work (2010). Shange wrote new poems as connections and themes emerged and continued distributing her voice among these seven women to then be shared with the world.

For Colored Girls has been recognized as a powerful and important work since its Broadway debut in 1976 (featuring that original ensemble). Shange calls this bittersweet, and I agree (Shange 2010). The show brings voices and stories to the stage that are rarely shared, even over 40 years later. Since Shange started working on the piece 1974, there have been many progressions in the conversations we have about feminism, intersectionality, and race. I mean, *For Colored Girls* is so intersectional and that was before the word intersectionality existed. Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined it in 1989 as a legal term to describe the overlaps between race, gender, class, and other aspects of identity that impact the way we exist and are treated in the world (Coaston). And that has been revolutionary for many feminists (though too many still aren't quite getting it) in the way feminist activism works. We have to advocate with all of our differences and similarities in mind. There are shared experiences among women of all backgrounds, but there are also community-specific experiences and oppressions that need to be recognized. Issues of discrimination exist for all women, but some communities are affected disproportionately based on other aspects of their intersecting identities. *For Colored Girls* is still addressing issues that have lingered since the 70s. The show remains powerful because Shange's expression of the specific issues Black women face transcends the last 4 decades. Black women -- and our society as a whole -- continue to

need the voice and outlook the show provides, which is both a testament to its power and a reminder of the progress we have yet to make.

One thing the show pushes back on is how women, are criticized for being “too emotional” every turn. Feeling too much, showing too much, showing those feelings in the wrong times and places. Emotions can be seen as your weakness or your power, and society will give you shit for using them as either. And that’s even more true for women of color, especially Black women who are often seen as “angry” or “aggressive”. Black women have to downplay strong emotions so that people don’t feel threatened. They have to control their natural responses more than anyone else because society has chosen to demonize their freedom of expression. And that’s not right.

Kamala Harris is running for vice president this year. Her actions, language, and overall emotional presentation have been scrutinized. She has to walk this line of polite enough, restrained enough, powerful but not too much so, well-informed and well-spoken but not too intimidating. Meanwhile, the other three white guys in the race can scream and shout and rage all they want. She has to fold her hands and look professional in the terms of her race and gender. She has been forced into these boxes of balance, in terms of emotion, presentation, and beliefs, that other politicians don’t really face. At least not to the same degree. *For Colored Girls* doesn’t buy into this - it celebrates Black women’s emotions, raw and with all of the power they possess. As it should. The production gives consolation, permission, and power to Black women.

For Colored Girls also demands that we listen to the stories and the voices of Black women. Voices that still, so often, get glossed over or diminished by the media. We talked about Breonna Taylor last time. People have been calling for the arrest of the

cops who killed her, and all but one was given a paid vacation and gets to keep his job. There have been protests and uprisings in her name, but they've been demonized by those in power, and hardly any official action has been taken. Officials, the cops, and the media are going backwards to destroy her image. A picture of her with a gun, judging her former relationships, anything to make her look like a person who maybe could have deserved the senseless acts committed against her. And this has happened to Black men too. But while Taylor's name is plastered across social media, her tragedy is not quite taken seriously. When Black men's wrongful deaths are treated solemnly, their names and last words something to rally behind, in a well-meaning but essentially trivialized attempt to show support Breonna's name quickly became a social media meme. Support for her became a contest of which tweet could get the most likes. The tweets start with an attention-grabbing picture or funny message like the PS5 announcement or a cartoon clip that ends with "anyways, arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor". Very performative, and ultimately really belittling, acts of solidarity. Cate Young from NPR did a whole interview about it. "It had stopped being something that was a reminder for justice and was something more about finding the cleverest way to hide the message" (Kelly and Young). The Say Her Name movement has countered empty activism by amplifying Black women's voices and deaths alongside the Black Lives Matter movement.

Other examples exist in the statistics. Partly because their stories so often go untold, we can see in the numbers the lack of attention that is given to Black women's life experiences. Black women are four times more likely to die during pregnancy as compared to white women (American Heart Association News). And it's because they have less access to and attention during care - the medical system doesn't take their pain

or knowledge of their body seriously. The same reasons have led to a disproportionate amount of Black women being affected by or dying from HIV, AIDS, and COVID-19 (Mahon). The same resources and respect are not given to Black women, in too many important areas of their lives.

For Colored Girls shares those voices. And it shares those voices with everyone. With people who otherwise haven't recognized the struggle of Black women. The stories of fearful medical care, the heightened violence Black women experience, and the loneliness that sometimes comes with those experiences. Shange shares her voice and experiences, and the experiences of others, to create a space for those women.

We should be producing *For Colored Girls* to provide a space on stage and in the audience for Black women to feel seen and heard. But the show is for everyone. As Kim Hall describes, Black women are at the eye of this storm that engulfs us all. It has themes to be valued and considered by all people, particularly other women (Hall). The title itself is enough to connect us. Shange said, "I was driving the No. 1 Highway in northern California and I was overcome by the appearance of two parallel rainbows. I had a feeling of near-death or near catastrophe. Then I drove through the rainbow and I went away. Then I put that together to form the title" (Cox-Cordova). I think every woman can recognize the feeling of being near the end, having the pressures of being a woman fall down on you, and as Shange says we find our rainbow or try to at least. And *For Colored Girls* has been that rainbow. It is the stories of Black women that share themes with the lives of all women. It presents a sense of community, the feeling of being seen and understood for the first time. The struggle of the balancing act that is being a woman. As seen and heard and felt by all women.

Something to consider is the backlash that came from African American men in the show's early runs. It has been argued that *For Colored Girls* shows Black men as unsavory people, especially in "a nite with Beau Willie Brown" (Shange). Honestly, that poem is the most controversial in this situation because it shows such horrible violence. And the image is pervasive, don't get me wrong. Beau Willie's PTSD doesn't come across so clearly in the 1975 version of the show. Not that that would defend his actions, but it does evoke an understanding of why he is so abusive, and how the systems have failed to help him too. The poem's original purpose was to give voice to the victim of domestic violence, and it still does. But it was not intended to demonize Black men by any means. Beau Willie is meant to be seen as desperate, for help and for Crystal. And this must be portrayed carefully. The new edition of the play from 2010 gives you more context into Beau Willie's character, having him return from Iraq, explaining that he is struggling with untreated PTSD. This version, or some context for the first, may help reduce any production backlash.

Speaking of edition changes. The poem "positive" was also added in the 2010 version of the script. It describes Black women's experience with HIV and AIDS. If you want to share the medical disparities and dual discrimination of Black women, this addition provides another shared experience. Especially given the current media attention to Black women's maternal death rates and the impact of COVID-19 on Black communities.

For Colored Girls has to be treated with care and respect. Depending on the staging, you can alter the stories that Shange tells. It is important to make sure the experiences can still be shared and still be powerful. This show is meant to be told by

Black voices, and impactful and successful productions lend themselves to that. This show provides a vulnerable yet powerful place for Black actresses to come together. It deserves to be produced and performed for that reason alone. In 2010, Shange wrote that “*For Colored Girls* was meant for women of color. *For Colored Girls* still is a women’s trip, and the connection we can make through it, with each other and for each other, is to empower us all” (Collins-Hughes). A good production will empower Black women’s voices and share that empowerment among all women. Resources to the show, information used in this episode, interviews, and the text can be found at our website.

EPISODE 4

Sexual Education and *Spring Awakening*

Welcome back to Listening Back. I'm your host, Maddie Rose. Do you want to read a play about the importance of comprehensive sex ed and reproductive rights? How about the pitfalls of suppressing the voices of teenagers? This week, we're talking about *Frühlings Erwachen*, better known as *Spring Awakening* by Frank Wedekind.

So a lot of you have probably at least heard of the musical *Spring Awakening* which opened on Broadway in 2006. The alt-rock music compliments the teen angst and frustration from the original play. And even more recently, in 2016, the Deaf West Theatre revived the show on Broadway.

But this week we are going to talk about the source material for the musical, the 19th century play. The show was written in late 1890 or early 1891 in Germany. This was in the German Empire that existed before World War 1. Education was centered more on dead and modern languages, science and math, rather than life skills teens would actually need (Fishman). Most schools at the time were religious, so sex education was left to the parents who probably avoided The Talk just as much as today's parents do. Frank Wedekind, the playwright and later a dramaturg, was known for scathing satires of the upper class (Cohen). *Spring Awakening* was one of his earliest shows and criticized adults for the misinformation and lack of sex ed given to teens.

Spring Awakening is a tragedy about teenagers. What can happen when we leave capable young people in the dark. It is crazy how it's 130 years later, and teens are still not given the information and credit they deserve. Teen voices are so quick to be stifled by older adults. "You don't get it, you're just a kid." But Malala Yousafzai became this vocal leader for women's right to education, and the Taliban tried to kill her because of it. And even more recent, social media has really helped teens organize and talk about things like sex and politics. Twitter and TikTok have opened a new world of unstifled dialogue where teens are advocating for Black Lives Matter, organizing for political causes, and reinventing our understanding of gender and sexuality (Cavill). I think adults are intimidated by these intellectual conversations because teens are genuinely starting to change things. The Parkland teens are leading the gun control movement because politicians refuse to act on behalf of school shooting victims (Alter). Greta Thunberg is leading a global teen climate revolution despite criticism from climate change deniers. Teenagers are incredibly powerful, and the adults know. They know, and many are terrified by what teens could do if they aren't held under their thumbs.

Spring Awakening is a show about the experiences of teenagers, and what happens when the adults (teachers, parents, and so on) ignore them. Even more specifically, it's an intense critique of the lack of sexual education that is very reflective of modern America. The play follows a group of young teens, all about fourteen, as they navigate early sexuality and adolescence. Every teenager in the show is deprived of any decent sex education, and it impacts the wellbeing of all of them.

There is a lot of disagreement in the US about what sexual education should be. Conservatives discourage comprehensive sex ed because they think it encourages sex in

general (even though teens are surrounded by sexual content in today's media).

Abstinence-only education is very prominent in the South, which is pretty dominated by conservative Christian communities that expect teens won't be having sex in the name of religion. Several states don't offer any kind of sex ed and all of the southern states required sex education be abstinence focused ("American Adolescents' Sources of Sexual Health Information"). So... why does the South have the highest teen pregnancy ratings in the country? In every state of the Bible Belt, over 25 out of a thousand girls get pregnant before 19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Abstinence-only education hinders teens from getting helpful information that can be life-changing. It doesn't teach about contraceptives, except for a poor demonstration of how to use a condom. It idolizes female virginity, shaming girls into avoidance of any more education. And it certainly doesn't bring up abortion.

A lack of sexual education definitely impacts the teen boys in *Spring Awakening*. 13-year-old Melchior is one of the only students in the show that thinks he understands sex. He uses that knowledge to rape his classmate Wendla and doesn't see anything wrong in his actions. When she asks him to stop, he says, "everything is selfishness, everything is egotism" because he doesn't realize how his actions have consequences for other people (Wedekind 88). He understands the mechanics of sex but can't talk to adults about it because they'll punish him for what he does know, not teach him more. So he has no idea how to act ethically or responsibly. He doesn't know what consent is, let alone how to know if he has it. To Melchior, sex is this adult situation that he can be in and take control of. And he's so disillusioned by the world and so angry with the passiveness of

adults that he uses that to lash out at Wendla. This obviously doesn't excuse his actions. But it does show how dangerous trying to force young people to stay ignorant can be.

Making things worse, his stilted view of what sex is and should be gets passed on to more uniformed teens. His friend Moritz can't talk to his mother about his sexual development, so he asks Melchior (37). Melchior writes Moritz an essay on sex, sharing his own misunderstandings. Teens shouldn't have to rely on each other for information that is so formative to their development. But we'll come back to Moritz, let's talk about Wendla.

Wendla is the most naive of the teens when it comes to her body's changes. Her mom is freaking out about her daughter growing up, so she infantilizes Wendla, treating her like even more of a child than she has in recent years, even making her dresses longer. Her mom goes out of her way to not answer Wendla's questions about her body changes and where babies come from. In her effort to "protect" her daughter, if you can call it that, she just confuses her. Wendla becomes pregnant after Melchior rapes her, and she honestly doesn't know what's going on (140). Her mother demonizes her for getting pregnant, while Wendla keeps asking how it happened since she was told that only married people in love can have babies. She's fourteen. Then her mom forces her to get an illegal abortion that kills her. Wendla gets no information, no help, and absolutely no bodily autonomy. And it literally kills her.

Wendla's mother finds an abortion provider despite the procedure being illegal. The play shows that making abortions against the law, and the lack of resources and proper training that causes, aren't enough to stop her abortion from happening. But it is enough to kill her. Conservative lawmakers have worked with the pro-life movement to

make abortions unobtainable by putting in restrictions and creating legal barriers that prevents women from being able to get the procedure. At the time of writing this episode, the GOP was really trying to nominate Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, assuming that she will make it possible to overturn Roe v. Wade. And at the time of recording, they have succeeded in their nomination. Overturning Roe v. Wade would overturn the federal legality of safe abortions. There are ten states that already have legislation in place that will criminalize abortion the minute Roe is overturned (“What if Roe Fell”). But it is absolutely ridiculous to think that abortions will simply just stop if they make them inaccessible or illegal. Between 1930 and 1965, almost 20% of maternal deaths were caused by abortion (Gold). And that’s just the reported ones. There’s no way of knowing the true statistics when women couldn’t even go to a real doctor to be treated.

Today, a lot of people don’t even consider abortion as an option. For some people, that comes from a sincere religious belief, but for so many others their “choice” is based on misinformation about what abortions are and the safety of the procedure. Fear tactics and dangerous rhetoric limit abortion availability even when it is legal. People are either denied information or given viciously wrong information to keep them from the procedure. And some of that wrong information has been encouraged by state governments. When people are ill informed, they are stripped of the choice to make the decision for themselves. Wendl’s mother takes away her freedom of choice by not educating her on pregnancy and forcing her to get an abortion --which, to be fair, isn’t shown as a good motherly decision--, and the law takes away her right to get that abortion safely. All that raises the question of who gets to decide on the reproductive

rights of young people, and why? *Spring Awakening* shows what happens when the right to choose is stripped from Wendla.

Okay, as promised, back to Moritz, another fourteen-year-old who is in the dark about puberty and his new sexual feelings. Moritz has a troubled relationship with his parents. He feels this immense pressure to be a perfect student and child. He doesn't have a safe space to ask questions or raise concerns without being yelled at. Moritz is also really struggling with school and has no one to talk to about that either. Competitive grading could get him kicked out and his parents would be furious with him. But the current curriculum is overwhelming him so much that he doesn't even want to be in school. So he's really stuck in this catch-22 of being punished either way: staying and failing, or dropping out. On top of his stress from school, Moritz now has to reckon with the overwhelming misinformation Melchior has given him. With all of these stressors in mind, Moritz asks for help from the one person he trusts, Melchior's mom. And she's no help because she doesn't understand the severity of Moritz's feelings. She gives him a vague, "You can do it!" response, and tells him to talk to his own mom (Wedekind 89). He gets so frustrated with not being heard and not being told that he commits suicide.

The play blames the adults for the teens' tragedies. They don't listen, they don't help, and some of them actively harm their children. They don't even treat them like people. All of the kids are blamed for situations they didn't create. Wendla is blamed for her pregnancy, Melchior is blamed for both her and Moritz's deaths, and Moritz is blamed for simply asking for help. These situations were all fostered by the adults, by keeping their children in the dark and making it impossible for them to get any

meaningful support. If their parents had known what was happening to them, things may have not felt so helpless.

I think that *Spring Awakening* has a lot to say to contemporary America. Historically, the content has been censored and banned, and that's because of the powerful messages the show presents ("The German Story"). Buts that's the point, right? Adults are uncomfortable with the knowledge teens already have, uncomfortable with them growing up, and uncomfortable acknowledging those things. I think we should make them reckon with that. Thank you for listening. Resources used in this episode and more information about the Deaf West production are available at our website.

EPISODE 5

Religious Hypocrisy and *God of Vengeance*

Hello and welcome back to Listening Back. I'm your host, Maddie Rose. Want to do a play about religious hypocrisy? Or just hypocrisy in general? This week we are going back to 1906 with *God of Vengeance* by Sholem Asch.

Sholem Asch was a Polish-born Jewish playwright who mostly wrote in Yiddish. *God of Vengeance* was his second play, and one of his earliest works in general. The show gave him quite a bit of notoriety for its content, which was incredibly bold for 1906. Asch immigrated to America following the play's debut Off-Broadway in December 1922 and then on Broadway in February 1923.

God of Vengeance criticizes religious hypocrisy and presents a sincere romance between two women. The show was written in Yiddish and toured across Europe in the same language. But when the show came to America, changes were made to the script (Vogel). The original Jewish actors were required to learn their roles in English or be replaced. Broadway producers wanted to change Manke's character to be a seductress sent to corrupt Rifkele, instead of an honest love interest the audience can like. There was dangerous backlash. The cast was arrested in the middle of their Broadway run (“‘God of Vengeance’ Cast is Indicted”). Their performance was considered obscene and indecent for the upper middle-class audience and by Jewish Americans.

God of Vengeance follows a Jewish family and their struggles with religious morality. Yekel owns a brothel that they live above, his wife is a former sex worker, and they see their daughter Rifkele as the peak of religious piety. Yekel commissions a Torah for his daughter and promises to marry her off to a religious man. He thinks this is enough to right his wrongdoings and immorality. He throws a party to celebrate this holy gesture, bragging about his actions and wealth. Yekel goes as far to say Rifkele is purer than all the young girls in town, including the Rabbi's daughter (Asch 12). She is treated like a token of perfect purity, as someone to redeem all of them. While Yekel tries to keep the downstairs business separate from his family to preserve Rifkele's innocence, she falls in love with Manke, one of the workers from the brothel.

Yekel bans Manke from coming upstairs but keeps her in the brothel. He wants to protect Rifkele's purity but continues to own and live above the brothel. He commissions a Torah for his daughter but disgraces it by throwing it on the ground in a fit of rage over his daughter's relationship.

Rifkele and Manke have a very sweet relationship, with most of the intimacy coming from the gentleness they show each other (Asch). Their relationship, which includes a kiss on stage, is written to be a very pure form of love that becomes corrupted by their environment. Rifkele and Manke are the characters that the audience is supposed to root for. We are meant to fall in love with their relationship and recognize the hypocrisy of the people keeping them apart.

Yekel and Sarah use the Torah, religious language, and Rifkele to seem like an upstanding Jewish family. It simply doesn't work. You can't claim to respect a religious relic and then throw a party to flaunt how rich you are and how expensive the relic is.

You can't idolize your daughter for her innocence and purity and then surround her with your greed and anger and disrespect. You can't blame your daughter for falling for a sex worker that you hire and house just below her bedroom. A girl who helps your daughter embrace her femininity through her appearance and art. A girl who has been allowed into your home to be a companion to your daughter and is nothing but good to her, unlike her own parents.

In the same way that Yekel uses the Torah to try and cover his horrible behavior with “religion”, it seems like a lot of conservatives in the US today use the bible to try to validate and defend their policy. I mean, the whole idea of America is founded on hypocrisy. “All men are created equal”, Jefferson wrote while owning hundreds of slaves. But right now, most of the hypocrisy I see seems to stem from this defense mechanism that conservative people and groups have adopted in the last few years.

I'm from the South where most people assume, wrongly by the way, that everyone is probably Christian. So, the Bible becomes the number one defense mechanism to justify your own personal beliefs and condemn anyone you don't like. The bible has tons of contradictions within it, so just about anything can be twisted to fit your personal, modern belief set. Hypocrisy becomes so easy.

God of Vengeance is this show about using religious language and icons to look good, right? Use the Torah, use your daughter, invite the Rabbi over, all to make yourselves look like a good Jewish family. Hoping the facade is enough to make people ignore the brothel and abusive behavior going on at the same address. In this play, it's Judaism. And a lot of people, in every religion, do the exact same thing. But I want to focus on Christianity here, because it's basically been established as the unofficial

national religion. Religious freedom and the separation of church and state are some of America's earliest principles, but somehow Christianity is pulled into all of our political debates and public discourse.

A lot of conservative people, beginning with the politicians, have this idea that they can defend their politics with Christianity. Because a good Christian wouldn't argue with the bible when you quote it verbatim, (just ignore the many translations and interpretations). Like when right-leaning people target gay marriage, or just LGBTQ people in general, they usually defend their politics with bible quotes. Because Leviticus! Yes, that's the (old testament, but whatever) one we'll use to get the other Christians to agree with us. This old testament quote from a religion that does not belong to everyone should be used in our policy making because... it's easier than saying you're homophobic? I guess? Nevermind love thy neighbor and forgive all sins. Nevermind that sexual orientation and gender identity don't change your actual level of humanity or right to equality. Nevermind that LGBTQ people are people and deserve to be treated as such. In terms of religious hypocrisy, LGBTQ people should have respect via the actual words attributed to Jesus. The second most important commandment, according to Jesus's words in the Book of Mark, is to love your neighbor (Mark 12.31). That includes your LGBTQ neighbor. It is hypocritical to deny people rights based on a book that also tells you to love them. Not to mention that in terms of general hypocrisy, it's wrong to use the bible as your only "evidence" against gay marriage because of the separation of church and state that's supposed to exist.

God of Vengeance shows Rifkele and Manke as the purest form of love in the show. It's a very powerful moment when they finally kiss. And it's their romance that the

show wants the audience to support. You aren't supposed to like her father. He says he loves and respects his daughter and the Torah, but he's willing to throw both away (Asch). All over her healthy, romantic relationship. The show argues that it is the religious hypocrites that are in the wrong, not the girls or their relationship. A lot of Americans, especially in the South could learn from this if they were given the chance.

By the way, the same hypocritical religious defenses are raised for abortion. We talked some about this in the last episode but it's important to acknowledge why a big chunk of the pro-life movement is hypocritical too. So many of them are against abortion often in a religious context. Again, putting aside the separation of church and state, so these same individuals will argue that abortion is murder, but won't fight for the lives of migrant children being taken from their families at the border. Many are pro-life for the unborn, but not the innocent people being murdered in the oil war. Pro-life but really just pro-birth, given that most of them don't seem to be offering help to the mothers who can't afford housing and food for their children. Abortions are often performed because of health issues, financial issues and more, but where are the advocates for paying anyone's hospital bills or utilities. It doesn't always seem to be about valuing life. It's about valuing birth and control over women. And it's religious hypocrisy when you argue these pro-life protests are done in the name of God. *God of Vengeance* shows the damages and immorality of using religion to seem like a good person. I might still disagree with their conclusion, but I could respect their position a lot more if its mission was to protect life and not just birth. But for now, it usually seems like more of an anti-choice organization using the Bible and Cross to defend their ideals.

Back to *God of Vengeance*. Remember what I said about the cast getting arrested? The heaviest criticism actually came from the Jewish community, who didn't like its portrayal of Jewish people, the use of the Torah, and the romance between two women. It was actually a Rabbi who filed the complaint (Horwitz). Of course, at the time their concern wasn't just about being seen as hypocrites. The Jewish community was facing anti-Semitism that had inflated during WW1 and the Great Depression. As the show toured and years went by, the Jewish community, Asch included, faced more anti-Semitism. Asch went as far as to pull the script from use as World War 2 approached. Asch wrote honest, real, dimensional characters who were also Jewish. And they were religious hypocrites. And it just so happens that his perfect model of a good Jewish character is also a lesbian. That doesn't make the show itself isn't anti-Semitic, but the representation of Jewish people in negative lights drew concern. It's unfair that the environment painted *God of Vengeance* in a bad light. It was one of the earliest Yiddish plays that was renowned across Europe and then in America (Nahshon). Its powerful message was resonant and enjoyed by plenty of audiences then and is still so resonant now.

After a few weeks of performances on Broadway, the cast was arrested for the so-called obscenity caused by Rifkele and Manke's kiss. They were arrested for the first lesbian kiss on Broadway that was originally written to be a beautiful and powerful moment of love. I found the article in the New York Times archive. The cast was charged for "violating the penal code in giving an alleged indecent, immoral and impure theatrical performance" ("God of Vengeance Cast' is Indicted"). They were convicted and deported. The Jewish cast. Deported back to Europe. During the Holocaust. Because the

representation of both Jewish people and lesbians was too shocking for upper class white Broadway.

The show *Indecent* by Paula Vogel really shines light on the creation and cast of *God of Vengeance*. It was produced in 2015 and highlights the tragedy of the cast and the hypocrisy of America's reaction (Vogel). It's a half-adaptation half-biography about *God of Vengeance's* origin and events surrounding the original productions. *Indecent* was quite a success because it gave that emotional depth of the characters of both *Indecent* and *God of Vengeance* (Cummings). It shows the love of the play from both the cast and international audience, and it shows the intense backlash leading to the cast's arrest. The adaptation provides the context needed to understand *God of Vengeance* and its importance. The added context of Asch's moral struggles, the cast's hard work and horrible end, and what the show actually did at the time is what really makes the play powerful. To produce *God of Vengeance* now, it needs that context. It adds power to the already resonant themes. *Indecent* can provide that, and I highly recommend you look into both. Resources for this episode can be found on our website.

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